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ABSTRACT

A principal from a district experiencing a sharp enrollment decline discusses some of the implications of the decision to close one of three high schools. The board policy developed to meet the challenge includes consideration of maintaining the quality of the educational program, the retention of tenured faculty, and the disposition of property. The issues facing the principal include a stabilized faculty that allows for no new blood, the problems inherent in the withdrawal of faculty from coaching and sponsoring extracurricular activities, apprehension in the faculty over their jobs, the difficulties in transferring teachers, and the need to make the programs in the merging schools compatible. (IRT)

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ENROLLMENT DECLINES AND REDUCTIONS IN FORCE--WHAT CAN ADMINISTRATORS DO?

Gilbert R. Weldy
NASSP Convention
Anaheim, California 1978

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT TEN YEARS AGO THAT WE WOULD BE MEETING HERE AT THE NASSP CONVENTION IN 1978 TO WRESTLE WITH THE ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT AND REDUCING STAFF? WE WERE TOO BUSY AT THAT TIME WORRYING ABOUT EXPANDING ENROLLMENTS, GOING ON RECRUITING TRIPS TO FIND QUALIFIED TEACHERS, GETTING ENOUGH MONEY TO BUILD NEW SCHOOLS, AND ORIENTING AND TRAINING OUR BEVY OF NEW STAFF MEMBERS EACH YEAR. IN THE SPACE OF A FEW SHORT YEARS, THIS GROWTH PHENOMENON HAS DONE AN ABOUT FACE. THE PILL, THE ECONOMY, THE LIFE STYLES AND FAMILY CUSTOMS OF OUR COUNTRY HAVE DRAMATICALLY CHANGED THE DEMOGRAPHY OF MANY OF OUR SCHOOL DISTRICTS. THE RETARDED BIRTHRATE WHICH DEMOGRAPHERS BEGAN TELLING US ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS OR MORE AGO WAS BOUND TO HAVE ITS EFFECT ON SCHOOLS. TO PUT IT SIMPLY, WE ARE IN THE SCHOOL BUSINESS, AND THERE ARE FAR FEWER CLIENTS NEEDING OUR SERVICES THAN BEFORE. IN FACT, THE TRENDS, IF THEY CONTINUE, INDICATE THAT PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT WHICH SHOT UP BY 38% BETWEEN 1962 and 1972 WILL ACTUALLY DROP BY 13% IN 1982. 1982 IS ALMOST HERE AND MANY OF OUR SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE ALREADY EXPERIENCING THIS DECLINE.

ENROLLMENT IN MY HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, A CLOSE-IN SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT NORTH OF CHICAGO WHOSE POPULATION GREW FROM 7000 TO 60,000 in 20 YEARS HAS ALREADY DECLINED BY 20 PERCENT FROM OUR PEAK ENROLLMENT OF 1969-1970. BY 1980, THE LOSS IN TOTAL ENROLLMENT WILL REACH 37%, AND WE WILL CLOSE ONE OF OUR THREE LARGE HIGH SCHOOLS. THE CHANGE HAS COME SO RAPIDLY THAT THE NEED FOR THE THIRD HIGH SCHOOL WHICH OPENED IN 1964 WILL COVER ONLY A SPAN OF 16 YEARS, HARDLY A REASONABLE LIFE

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EXPECTANCY FOR A MODERN, WELL-EQUIPPED HIGH SCHOOL BUILDING DESIGNED TO ACCOMMODATE 2500 STUDENTS. ENROLLMENT PROJECTIONS, ACCURATE IN PAST YEARS TO A MARGIN OF 1% OR 2% TELL US THAT BY 1986 WE WILL HAVE FEWER THAN 3000 STUDENTS WHO CAN THEN PROBABLY BE HOUSED IN ONE SCHOOL. THIS IS A DROP IN A SPAN OF 15 YEARS FROM 8000 to 3000 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS.

HOW HAS THIS CHANGED ADMINISTRATIVE LIFE IN OUR DISTRICT? INSTEAD OF RECRUITING AND HIRING 25 TO 30 NEW TEACHERS EACH YEAR, WE HAVE NEEDED VIRTUALLY NO NEW TEACHERS FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS. YEAR BEFORE LAST, WE EMPLOYED NO NEW TEACHERS IN A FACULTY THAT WAS THEN 150 IN MY SCHOOL. EACH YEAR ALL NON-TENURE TEACHERS ARE ROUTINELY DISMISSED UNTIL WE CAN BE SURE, BASED ON STUDENT REGISTRATIONS, THAT WE HAVE NEED FOR THEM. ~~DON THOMAS~~ WILL EXPAND ON THIS "PEOPLE" PROBLEM--THE "RIFFING" OF OUR FACULTIES AND WHAT ADMINISTRATORS CAN DO IN THIS AREA.

NONE OF US ANTICIPATED ALL OF THE QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, AND ANXIETIES THAT HAVE SURFACED IN PLANNING FOR THE CLOSING OF ONE OF OUR HIGH SCHOOLS, A CLOSING SCHEDULED FOR 1980, FULLY 2½ YEARS AWAY. THE DECISION TO CLOSE THF SCHOOL WAS MADE IN THE SPRING OF 1975. NEW BOUNDARIES WERE DRAWN WITHIN THE NEXT YEAR. COMMITTEES TO BEGIN PLANNING FOR THE CLOSING WERE FORMED AND HAVE ALL REPORTED THEIR TENTATIVE PLANS TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION. THEY ALL CONTINUE TO MEET AND UPDATE THEIR PLANS AND THEIR TIME TABLE EVERY FEW MONTHS.

DOES ALL THIS SEEM PREMATURE? NOT IF YOU CONSIDER THE FACT THAT THE FRESHMEN STUDENTS WHO ENTERED NILES EAST HIGH SCHOOL THIS PAST FALL WILL BE GRADUATING FOUR YEARS FROM NOW FROM NILES NORTH OR NILES WEST. THESE STUDENTS HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED COUNSELORS WHO WILL HOPEFULLY FOLLOW THEM TO THEIR NEW SCHOOL. CURRICULUM CHANGES INTENDED TO GUARANTEE STUDENTS A SMOOTH TRANSITION TO THEIR NEW SCHOOL ARE UNDERWAY.

THESE CHANGES INVOLVE TEXTBOOKS, COURSE TITLES, COURSE OBJECTIVES, COURSE CONTENT, GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS, AND GRADE WEIGHTINGS. HOW MUCH LEAD TIME WOULD YOU AS AN ADMINISTRATOR WANT TO ENGINEER THESE CHANGES IN YOUR SCHOOL? HOPEFULLY, WE HAVE STARTED SOON ENOUGH. WHAT THEN ARE SOME OF THESE MORE MUNDANE CONCERNS THAT STUDENTS AND PARENTS HAVE RAISED THAT NONE OF US WOULD HAVE ANTICIPATED?

WILL STUDENTS HAVE THEIR SAME COUNSELOR WHEN THEY TRANSER TO THEIR NEW SCHOOL?

WILL ALL THE SAME COURSES AND SEQUENCES OF COURSES BE AVAILABLE IN THE NEW SCHOOL?

HOW WILL STUDENTS FROM THE CLOSED SCHOOL BE CONSIDERED FOR LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AS EDITORS, CAPTAINS, CHEERLEADERS, AND PERFORMERS?

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE CLOSED SCHOOLS' TRADITIONS: THE SCHOOL SONG, THE YEARBOOK, THE TROPHIES, THE CLASS GIFTS?

HOW WILL ATHLETES HE GIVEN A CHANCE TO TRY OUT FOR TEAMS?

WHAT HAPPENS TO LIBRARY BOOKS AND MEMORABILIA THAT HAVE BEEN DONATED BY PERSONS IN THE COMMUNITY?

HOW WILL STUDENTS BE RANKED IN THEIR CLASSES WHEN THE SCHOOLS MERGE? ARE THE GRADING SYSTEMS COMPATIBLE?

WILL ALL THE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR ATTENDANCE, OPEN CAMPUS, AND BUILDING RULES BE THE SAME?

HOW WILL ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY MEMBERS BE ASSIGNED?

THE NILES TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION HAD DETERMINED THAT THERE WERE SEVEN FUNDAMENTAL POSITIONS THAT THEY WOULD EXPECT THE ADMINISTRATORS TO CARRY OUT.

1. THE BOARD'S DECISION AND ACTIONS MUST BE BASED ON ITS HIGHEST PRIORITY...THE MAINTENANCE OR IMPROVEMENT OF A QUALITY HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR EVERY STUDENT IN NILES TOWNSHIP.

2. ECONOMIC PRESSURE WILL REQUIRE THAT THE TOTAL SCHOOL ENROLLMENT BE HOUSED IN TWO SCHOOLS, BEGINNING WITH THE 1980-81 SCHOOL YEAR.
3. THE BOARD OF EDUCATION WILL STRIVE TO RETAIN ALL TENURED FACULTY MEMBERS.
4. THE DISTRICT OFFICE BUILDING WILL BE PHASED OUT AT THE EARLIEST DATE, CONSISTENT WITH FREEING SPACE IN ONE OF THE HIGH SCHOOLS FOR THESE ACTIVITIES.
5. THE BOARD OF EDUCATION PLANS TO MAINTAIN CONTROL OF ALL ITS CURRENT SCHOOL PROPERTY, WITH THE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION OF THE CENTRAL BUILDING, TO ASSURE ADEQUATE SPACE FOR FUTURE ENROLLMENT.
6. BARRING UNFOPESEEN DEVELOPMENTS, NILES EAST HIGH SCHOOL WILL BE VACATED BY SEPTEMBER OF 1980.
7. IN MEETING ITS COMMITMENT TO QUALITY EDUCATION FOR EVERY STUDENT, THE BOARD OF EDUCATION IS PREPARED TO GO TO EXTRAORDINARY LENGTHS TO ASSURE QUALITY PROGRAMS TO STUDENTS ENROLLED AT NILES EAST RIGHT UP TO AND INCLUDING THE LAST DAY OF THE 1979-80 SCHOOL YEAR.

BY FEBRUARY OF 1976 THE BOARD HAD APPOINTED TWO COMMITTEES, TO IMPLEMENT THEIR "PLAN OF ORGANIZATION FOR CLOSING NILES EAST HIGH SCHOOL." THE FIRST CONCENTRATED ON PEOPLE AND THINGS AND THE OTHER ON THE BUILDING AND THE PROPERTY.

THE FIRST COMMITTEE WAS HEADED BY THE NILES EAST PRINCIPAL AND INCLUDED ADMINISTRATORS FROM THE OTHER TWO SCHOOLS ALONG WITH TEACHERS, CITIZENS, AND STUDENTS FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL AS WELL AS FROM THE JUNIOR HIGHS. YOU SEE, NONE OF THE STUDENTS IN NILES EAST HIGH SCHOOL AT THE TIME THE DECISION TO CLOSE THE SCHOOL WAS MADE WOULD BE AROUND IN 1980 WHEN THE SCHOOL ACTUALLY CLOSED.

THE COMMITTEE ON PEOPLE AND THINGS SOON FOUND THEY NEEDED SEVERAL SUB-COMMITTEES:

1. STUDENT ARTICULATION
2. CERTIFIED STAFF ARTICULATION
3. CLASSIFIED STAFF ARTICULATION
4. DISTRIBUTION/DISPOSAL OF FURNITURE, EQUIPMENT, AND AWARDS
5. DISPOSITION OF LIBRARY COLLECTION

FROM THE STANDPOINT OF A PRINCIPAL OF A SCHOOL WITH DECLINING ENROLLMENT (FROM 2700 to 2200 in 8 YEARS) AND A SCHOOL WHICH BY OUR PROJECTIONS PROBABLY HAS A LIFE EXPECTANCY OF PROBABLY NOT MORE THAN SEVEN OR EIGHT MORE YEARS, I CAN RELATE SOME OF THE PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT CONFRONT THE PRINCIPAL IN SUCH A CIRCUMSTANCE.

1. WE HAVE EMPLOYED VIRTUALLY NO NEW TEACHERS FOR FOUR OR FIVE YEARS. OUR FACULTY HAS STABILIZED; THERE IS NO TURNOVER; THE EXPERIENCE AND MATURITY LEVEL HAS ADVANCED STEADILY WITH NO INFUSION OF NEW BLOOD. THIS HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL IN-SERVICE ACTIVITIES AND FOR RETRAINING EXCESS PEOPLE TO FIT PLACES WHERE THERE IS NEED. VIRTUALLY OUR ENTIRE FACULTY IS ON TENURE.
2. IT HAS HAD AN EFFECT ON OUR ABILITY TO HIRE NEW TEACHERS BECAUSE WE CANNOT ASSURE THEM MORE THAN A ONE-YEAR CONTRACT. WE HIRE PEOPLE WHO ARE AVAILABLE AND CLOSE BY, SINCE IT WOULD BE UNFAIR TO BRING IN A TEACHER FROM ANOTHER AREA MOVING A FAMILY AND ALL.

3. THE MATURING (OR AGING) FACULTY HAS GRADUALLY WITHDRAWN FROM COACHING AND SPONSORSHIP OF OUR EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, REQUIRING US TO MAKE ALL KINDS OF SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS TO KEEP OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE FOR OUR STUDENTS IN THE ATHLETIC TEAMS, MUSIC, THEATRE, FORENSICS, AND CLUB PROGRAMS.

   WE ARE NOT ABLE TO GO OUT INTO THE MARKET TO HIRE NEW TEACHERS TO FILL OUR COACHING AND SPONSORING VACANCIES.

4. UNCERTAINTY AND APPREHENSION PERVADE FACULTY FEELINGS AS TEACHERS EXAMINE SENIORITY LISTS AND ANXIOUSLY WAIT FOR REGISTRATION TALLIES TO COME IN TO DETERMINE WHETHER THEY WILL HAVE A JOB OR EVEN PART OF A JOB. THEY COUNT HEADS OF THOSE ON LEAVE AND PURSUE EVERY RUMOR OF SOMEONE GOING ON LEAVE, RESIGNING, OR RETIRING EARLY. TEACHERS ARE MORE SENSITIVE ABOUT UNFAVORABLE EVALUATIONS AND ARE MORE INCLINED TO CONTEST ANYTHING GOING INTO AN OFFICIAL RECORD THAT THEY THINK MIGHT BE USED AGAINST THEM. THEY ARE SURE WE ARE BUILDING CASES WITH UNFAVORABLE EVALUATIONS AS A MEANS OF GETTING RID OF UNWANTED FACULTY (IN A FEW CASES, THEY MAY BE RIGHT.)

5. IN DISTRICTS SUCH AS OURS, WHERE THREE SCHOOLS ARE TO BECOME TWO, THERE IS ALREADY MOUNTED A VIGOROUS EFFORT TO MAKE EVERYTHING IN THE THREE SCHOOLS UNIFORM SO THAT WHEN THE EAST SCHOOL CLOSES, STUDENTS WILL MAKE THE TRANSITION WITHOUT HARDSHIP, WITHOUT LOSING A STEP. THIS HAS REQUIRED SOME RATHER DRASTIC, UNWANTED CHANGES IN THE TWO RECEIVING SCHOOLS, WHERE USUALLY IT HAS MEANT THAT THE MOST INNOVATIVE SCHOOL IS BEING FORCED TO GIVE UP PROGRAMS AND ARRANGEMENTS THAT DO NOT EXIST IN THE OTHER TWO. FOR EXAMPLE, OUR MOST INNOVATIVE SCHOOL IS MAKING ADJUSTMENTS WHERE ELECTIVE COURSES HAD REPLACED THE TRADITIONAL SURVEY COURES IN ENGLISH

AND SOCIAL STUDIES. WHEN FACULTIES OF THE THREE SCHOOLS COME TOGETHER WITH INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE BOARD OF EDUCATION TO MAKE THEIR PROGRAMS UNIFORM, THE MAJORITY USUALLY PREVAILED. THE VOTE IS 2 TO 1.

6. OF COURSE, DECLINING ENROLLMENT MEANS INSUFFICIENT ENROLLMENT TO MAINTAIN MANY OF THE SPECIALIZED COURSES THAT A LARGER SCHOOL CAN JUSTIFY. THIS DOES NOT HAVE THE EFFECT ON QUALITY THAT SOME WOULD CHARGE--UNLESS YOU ACCEPT THE IDEA THAT THE QUALITY OF A SCHOOL IS MEASURED BY THE NUMBER OF COURSES IT OFFERS. IT DOES TOUCH UPON QUALITY WHEN THE COURSES ELIMINATED ARE THE ADVANCED LEVELS OF WELL ESTABLISHED SEQUENCES SUCH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE, MATH AND SCIENCE AND THE AP COURSES IN ANY SUBJECT FIELD.

7. RE-ASSIGNMENT AND TRANSFER OF TEACHERS FROM THE CLOSING SCHOOL IS FRAUGHT WITH POSSIBILITIES FOR MANIPULATION, BACK-ROOM BARGAINING AND SECRET DEALING. TEACHERS AT EAST ARE ALREADY ANXIOUS TO KNOW WHICH SCHOOL THEY WILL TRANSFER TO. THE COMMITTEE TO SET UP THIS PROCEDURE HAS ALREADY DETERMINED THAT TEACHERS SHOULD BE ASKED PREFERENCES FOR BUILDING, DEPARTMENT, AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR ASSIGNMENTS, NOT NECESSARILY IN THAT ORDER. THEY WILL BE ASKED THIS PREFERENCE FULLY 18 MONTHS BEFORE THE CLOSING. INTERESTINGLY, TEACHERS APPOINTED BY THE UNION TO SERVE ON THIS COMMITTEE HAVE STATED THAT SOME TEACHERS WILL WANT TO KNOW WHO THEIR ADMINISTRATOR OR SUPERVISOR WILL BE BEFORE THEY EXPRESS A PREFERENCE. WE ADMINISTRATORS WERE FLATTERED; WE WERE GLAD TO HEAR THAT WE DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE. THE IMPLICATION IS, HOWEVER, THAT POSSIBLY ADMINISTRATIVE ASSIGNMENTS SHOULD BE MADE EVEN BEFORE TEACHER ASSIGNMENTS. PARTICULARLY, IF WE EXPECT THE ADMINISTRATORS TO HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SELECTING, PLACING, AND ASSIGNING THEIR TEACHERS.

8. THE TRAUMA FOR THE ADMINISTRATORS ALONG WITH CLERICAL, CUSTODIAL, PARA-PROFESSIONAL, AND FOOD SERVICES STAFF IS EVEN MORE CRITICAL, WHEREAS TEACHERS' JOBS ARE RELATIVELY SECURE, THE OTHER GROUPS WILL BE REDUCED BY ROUGHLY 1/3 AT THE TIME THE EAST SCHOOL CLOSES. THERE WILL BE NO SIMILAR GRADUAL REDUCTION IN STAFF FOR THESE OTHER CLASSES OF EMPLOYEES. CLERICAL, CUSTODIAL, FOOD SERVICE, PARA-PROFESSIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE EMPLOYEES ARE ASSIGNED MORE BY FUNCTION AND POSITION THAN BY RATIO TO THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS.

SO, WHAT CAN ADMINISTRATORS DO?

THIS ERA IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION WILL CALL FOR THE GREATEST EXERCISE OF THOUGHTFULNESS AND HUMAN CONSIDERATION BY US ADMINISTRATORS. TOO MANY OF OUR DECISIONS WILL BE SEEN AS NOT JUST UNFAVORABLE TO SOME PERSONS' INTERESTS. THEY WILL IN ACTUALITY BE DECISIONS THAT RESULT IN PAIN AND ANQUISH FOR MANY OF OUR EMPLOYEES AND COLLEAGUES. I SPEAK OF THE CUT-BACKS, THE LAY-OFFS, THE TRANSFERS, THE UNWANTED OR UNDESIRABLE ASSIGNMENTS, THE REDUCTIONS IN FORCE. A LOT HAS BEEN SAID IN RECENT YEARS ABOUT MAKING SCHOOLS MORE HUMANE. WITH SO MANY PEOPLE WE WORK WITH EXPERIENCING SETBACKS AND DISPLACEMENTS, WE ADMINISTRATORS WILL BE CHALLENGED TO DEAL MORE PERSONALLY AND HUMANELY WITH THESE FEELINGS AND DO ALL WE CAN TO HELP PEOPLE IN OUR SCHOOLS ADJUST TO THIS ADVERSITY.

NOT ONLY DOES DECLINING NUMBERS OF STUDENTS MEAN FEWER JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN ALL CATEGORIES OF EMPLOYEES, IT MEANS ALSO MANY TIMES A REDUCTION IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS AND A RE-ARRANGEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES. FEWER ALTERNATIVES IN THE SCHOOL DOES NOT MEAN A DIMINUTION OF QUALITY. AS ADMINISTRATORS OUR TASK WILL BE TO MAINTAIN ALL OF THE QUALITIES OF GOOD SCHOOLS AND INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS FOR OUR

FEWER NUMBERS OF STUDENTS. MANY OF US MIGHT ACTUALLY WELCOME A SCHOOL WHERE THE STUDENT POPULATION IS A MANAGEABLE NUMBER. THE PRINCIPAL CAN AGAIN RELATE MORE PERSONALLY TO THE STUDENTS AND TAKE AN INTEREST IN THEM AS INDIVIDUALS INSTEAD OF AS NUMBERS ON A COMPUTER CARD. HERE THERE SHOULD BE AN ADVANTAGE.

PROBABLY, THE MOST CRITICAL AREA FOR THE PRINCIPAL DURING THESE TIMES WILL BE IN THE NEED TO COMMUNICATE CAREFULLY. WHEN RUMORS RUN WILD; EVERY BIT OF NEWS THREATENS SOMEONE'S FUTURE; AND EVERY BOARD DECISION APPEARS TO BE DETRIMENTAL TO SOMEONE'S INTERESTS, THE PRINCIPAL MUST KEEP AHEAD OF ALL THE SCARY STORIES WITH CLEAR, OPEN, DECISIVE COMMUNICATIONS TO THE FACULTY, STAFF, STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY. ONLY THEN CAN EVERYONE'S ANXIETIES BE RELIEVED: INDIVIDUALS CAN MAKE THEIR PLANS, ALTERNATIVES CAN BE WEIGHED; AND THE SCHOOL MOVE ON WITHOUT DISRUPTION AND TURMOIL. THE PRINCIPAL'S ABILITIES IN THE AREA OF COMMUNICATION WILL BE TESTED INDEED.

SMALLER SCHOOLS, PARTICULARLY THOSE REDUCED FROM THE MONOLITHIC, IMPERSONAL, GOLIATHS THAT WE'VE WORKED WITH CAN CLEARLY BE AN ADVANTAGE. PRINCIPALS CAN LOOK TO THIS ERA WITH SOME EXCITEMENT AND ENTHUSIASM. I KNOW I HAVE SOME PLEASANT EXPECTANCY OF HAVING A STUDENT BODY OF 1700-1800 RATTLING AROUND IN A SCHOOL BUILDING DESIGNED FOR 2500.

ON THAT POSITIVE NOTE, I WILL HOLD ANY FURTHER IDEAS UNTIL THE DISCUSSION PORTION OF OUR SESSION.